

A Roundtable on Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and Global Struggle for Freedom*

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and Keisha N. Blain

Spaces of Their Own

Adam Ewing

In *An American Dilemma* (1944), his landmark study on the “Negro problem” in the United States, Gunnar Myrdal declared the impossibility of black nationalist politics. In a section of the book entitled “The Garvey Movement,” prepared with the assistance of Ralph Bunche, Myrdal acknowledged the remarkable “response from the Negro masses” to Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey and his organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). But this response, he argued, had come at a cost.¹

Because Garveyism relied on what Myrdal referred to as “an irrational and intensively racial, emotional appeal,” it alienated whites and was “rightly” rejected by the “better” classes of black Americans. And because, in his view, it should be taken “as an evident matter of fact” that black people could “never hope to break down the caste wall except with the assistance of white people,” Garveyism and likeminded movements were “doomed to ultimate dissolution and collapse.” The undeniable appeal of Garveyism as a mass movement—and its unprecedented success—was rendered meaningless by the more pertinent reality that nothing good could possibly come of it.²

In the generation after the publication of *An American Dilemma*, African American history acquired mainstream acceptance in the American historical profession. And just as Myrdal’s formulation of the “Negro problem” had a notable impact in shaping the policy parameters of the civil rights struggle, his conclusions about the virtue of integrationist politics and the impossibility of black nationalism became accepted truths of mainstream historiography.

In *Black Moses* (1955), the first published biography of Marcus Garvey, E. David Cronon argued that Garvey had sold “an unrealistic escapist program of racial chauvinism” to “the unsophisticated and unlettered masses.” He also complained that Garvey “sought to raise high the walls of racial nationalism at a time when most thoughtful men were seeking to tear down these barriers.” Like Myrdal, Cronon marveled at Garvey’s success as a mass leader while dismissing that success as a tragic and fruitless mistake.³

When Black Power emerged in the second half of the 1960s, bringing with it confident new articulations of black nationalism, prominent American historians moved forcefully to inoculate the profession—and particularly

the newly respectable field of African American history—from its supposedly pernicious influence. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warned that black nationalism “yearns for an American system of apartheid,” and he encouraged historians to rebuke the “spread of irrationality” and “preserve the integrity of the historical discipline.” C. Vann Woodward counseled black historians to reject the “cults of black nationalism” and their yearning for “an inverted segregation, a black apartheid.”⁴

Similarly, Theodore Draper argued in *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (1970) that black nationalism was informed by “fantasy,” “racism,” and “theological credulity,” but was unfortunately grounded in “just enough reality” to continue to “haunt American Negro movements and messiahs.” And in the primary source volume, *Black Nationalism in America* (1970), editors August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, in a remarkable addendum to the volume’s introduction, broke ranks with their co-editor, John Bracey Jr., to assure readers that black nationalism was a regrettable pit stop on the road to an integrated society. “It would be unfortunate,” they wrote, if the majority support for integration “were obscured by current popular excitement over separatist tendencies, or by the focus and emphasis of this volume.”⁵

This propensity to remove black nationalism from the field of rational discussion and debate has not gone unchallenged. Since the publication of Amy Jacques Garvey’s pioneering work, *Garvey and Garveyism* (1963), scholars of Garveyism have generated a counternarrative (and, via the work of Robert A. Hill and the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, built a counterarchive) that cuts against the persistent marginalization of the movement in mainstream discourse.⁶ In the past two decades, a vibrant scholarship on the Black Power movement has given voice to black nationalist perspectives from the 1960s and 1970s.⁷

And yet, as Michael C. Dawson and others have noted, black nationalism remains “systematically underrepresented” in scholarly conceptions of the black freedom struggle.⁸ It is not simply that black nationalism and black nationalists are written out of these narratives. One would be hard-pressed to find a textbook on African American history that fails to mention Martin Delany, or Marcus Garvey, or Malcolm X. It is that scholars continue to approach black nationalism from the position of its impossibility.

In this context, colorful activists like Garvey serve as useful narrative devices or as foils. They offer powerful

testimony to the horrors of racial oppression. They create iconography and shape culture. What has remained undertheorized is the import of black nationalism as a living politics, one that has always had profound consequences in shaping black communities, projecting black perceptions, and structuring relations of power. As Brenda Gayle Plummer long ago observed, “the scholarly literature often fails to link black nationalism to vital world-historical currents,” presenting black nationalism and pan-Africanism not as globally significant movements engaged in struggles against colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and white supremacy, but as merely “esoteric crusade[s].”⁹

All of this is to say that Keisha N. Blain’s new book is not merely a remarkable work of scholarship, but also a timely one. *Set the World on Fire* uncovers a vibrant world of black nationalist activism during the Great Depression, World War II, and early Cold War eras. Far from fading with the declining fortunes of Garvey’s UNIA, Blain shows, black nationalist politics thrived in these decades under the leadership of a number of dynamic black women theorists and organizers. By following the lives and work of Amy Ashwood Garvey, Mittie Maud Lena Gordon, Celia Jane Allen, and others, Blain not only makes a series of important historiographical interventions but also an ontological one. In *Set the World on Fire*, black nationalism is anchored in time and place and in the lived experience and political aspirations of its adherents. Its rootedness creates, sustains, and reproduces the conditions of its possibility.

Set the World on Fire joins a recent wave of scholarship that has illustrated the centrality of Garveyism to the black freedom struggle, both in the United States and elsewhere.¹⁰ The book opens with the rise of the UNIA, which by the early 1920s had spread its message of anti-colonialism, race unity, and black pride throughout the world and had emerged as the largest mass movement in the history of the African diaspora. Blain shows how Amy Ashwood Garvey, Marcus Garvey’s collaborator and first wife, played a crucial role in the UNIA’s formation and early constitution; how black women like Amy Jacques Garvey, Maymie De Mena, and Laura Kofey were drawn to the movement; how black women were constrained by the patriarchal rhetoric and gendered hierarchy within the organization; and how they sought, often with success, to challenge these proscriptions and expand leadership opportunities for women.

At the same time, Blain encourages scholars to look beyond Garveyism to recognize the broader, deeply established, and eclectic traditions out of which it emerged. The black nationalist aspiration for autonomy, for freedom from the colonizing and subordinating impulses of Western society, had found expression in marronage and in the insurrectionary plots of the enslaved, in emigration and exodus movements, in freemasonry and religious worship. It was no accident that Mittie Maud Lena Gordon, who launched the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) after splitting from the UNIA in 1929, was raised in Arkansas, a hotbed of “Liberia fever” in the nineteenth century.

Blain’s approach, as she points out, acknowledges the influence of Garveyism without reducing black nationalism to a single stream of thought and activism. The PME, she notes, adopted several tenets of Garveyism but also took on elements of Noble Drew Ali’s syncretic form of Islam and strains of Ethiopianism. And as the PME acquired a following among working-poor black women and men during the Great Depression, Gordon and her followers brought to life a grassroots organization that articulated a variety of black nationalism that presented

its own theoretical and practical innovations. Notably, the PME offered a space for black women’s leadership—on the board of directors, as supervisors of chapters, on the executive council—that was unavailable within the more rigid gender constraints of the UNIA.

The creation of space is a crucial and recurring theme in *Set the World on Fire*. If organizations like the UNIA and PME sought to build on long historical trajectories, they also intervened in struggles over the negotiation of black peoples’ daily existence in place. Black nationalist women, Blain shows, pursued “autonomous spaces in which to advance their own social, political, and economic goals” (6). She refers to those spaces repeatedly. Within the UNIA, activists like the Freetown-based Adelaide Casely Hayford found a “space” to advance their aims (28). Women sought to lead “from the margins” of the patriarchal spaces of the UNIA (29). The decline of the UNIA opened up new space for women to engage in black nationalist politics (45). The PME “provided a crucial space for working-poor black men and women in Chicago to engage in black nationalist and internationalist politics during the economic crisis of the 1930s” (61). Organizing for the PME in Mississippi, Celia Jane Allen was able to gain access to existing spaces of exchange—the black church and its social networks, Garveyite networks—to build new spaces for grassroots politics (84, 103). And so on.

Within black communities, black nationalist organizations and publications offered “political incubator[s]” where gender conventions could be challenged, stretched, and transformed (20). And in defense of those communities, they attempted to redraw space to link local activism to global struggles (what Blain calls “grassroots internationalism”), to transgress state power, or otherwise to redraw “geographies of containment” in favor of their own “rival geographies.”¹¹ This effort to reconfigure space—whether to build a “nation within a nation,” to link hands with anti-colonial activists around the world, or to relocate to Liberia—was at the heart of the black nationalist imagination. By locating black nationalism in the places it sought to transform, Blain is able to give voice to its powerful appeal.

The overall effect of Blain’s methodology—which reveals the enduring popularity, flexibility, and ingenuity of black nationalist women’s activism over several decades—is to expose the “thinness” of much of our conversations and assumptions about the black nationalist tradition. The current narrative sees black nationalist politics fading from the scene with the UNIA in the 1920s, only to resurface several decades later with the rise of Malcolm X and his heirs in the Black Power movement. The Marcus-to-Malcolm trajectory focuses our attention on two dramatic eras of activism, visibility, and stridency. By doing so, it lends weight to the impression that black nationalism is more of an impulse than a tradition, more the result of external stimuli (World War I, decolonization, the civil rights movement, the urban crisis) than of political desire, more the product of charismatic leaders than of popular will. By contextualizing black nationalism in time and space, Blain points to a way to write black nationalism back into the narrative framework of the black freedom struggle.

To see the promise of this approach, one has only to look at *Set the World on Fire*’s wonderful third chapter, in which Blain painstakingly recovers the organizing work of Allen in the Jim Crow South. Following the PME’s wildly popular emigration campaign of the early 1930s, Gordon sent Allen down south to organize sharecroppers and other rural blacks around the shared goals of Pan-African unity,

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economic self-sufficiency, political self-determination, and Liberian emigration. Working with limited financial resources, Allen nevertheless built a strong organizational base in Mississippi, and developed a political network that stretched into Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee. By cataloguing Allen's and the PME's efforts to establish spaces for intellectual exchange, to build activist networks, and to train local leaders, Blain uncovers a black nationalist "organizing tradition" that she rightly compares to the far better known and more celebrated work of civil rights organizers like Ella Baker.¹²

Indeed, *Set the World on Fire* demonstrates not only how much we can learn by asserting black nationalism's possibility, but how much work remains to be done. Blain's primary focus on the Peace Movement of Ethiopia and on the effort by black nationalist women in the PME and elsewhere to promote Liberian emigration draws much-needed attention to a rich and enduring stream of black nationalist activism. But as Blain indicates at many points in the book, the streams of thought and activism emerging from the UNIA's heyday were manifold and diverse.

During the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, black nationalist ideas and aspirations were pursued by followers of the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, the Universal Ethiopian Student's Association, and Carlos Cooks's African Nationalist Pioneer Movement.¹³ They took root in the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica, the Wellington movement in South Africa, the literary renaissance in Harlem, Havana, and Port-au-Prince, and the global response to the Ethiopian crisis of 1935. During these critical decades, black nationalist varieties of pan-Africanism merged with Marxist-influenced ones to generate a new and explosive anti-colonial praxis. Black nationalist ideas were adopted in creative ways by radicals like Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, Paul and Eslanda Robeson, Claudia Jones and C. L. R. James, and others. In other words, amid the global transformations of the mid-twentieth century, black nationalism worked its way into the fabric of anti-racist, anti-colonial, and liberatory politics. It was not an adjunct to the global black freedom struggle. On the contrary, it was enmeshed within its central story: the effort to decolonize nations, the law, and the mind; to create spaces free of the false universalism of the West, and to create citizens empowered as equal participants in global society.

Blain's work has rightly garnered attention for its recovery of the voices of black nationalist women. *Set the World on Fire*, along with recent work from scholars such as Ula Y. Taylor and Ashley D. Farmer, demands that future studies of black nationalism conceptualize women leaders and participants at the center of the narrative.¹⁴ In accomplishing this important revision, Blain has shifted the axis of our vision in another way. For decades, too much scholarship on the black freedom struggle has viewed black nationalism through the lens of failure, impossibility, impracticality, and pathology. *Set the World on Fire* encourages us to see its lifeblood—and its revolutionary potential—in the historical traditions of Africa and its diaspora, and in the aspirations of ordinary black men and women to create spaces of their own.

Notes:

1. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944; repr., New Brunswick, NJ, 1996), 746–49.
2. *Ibid.*, 836, 852–53.
3. E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA* (Madison, WI, 1955), 203, 220–22.
4. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Nationalism and History," *Journal of Negro History* 54, no. 1 (1969): 22, 29 (italics removed); C. Vann Woodward, "Clio with Soul," *Journal of American History* 56, no. 1 (1969): 14–15, 52.
5. Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York, 1970), 84–86; John H. Bracey Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis, IN,

1970), liii–lv. For an account of the historical profession's marginalization of black nationalist narratives, see Adam Ewing, "The Challenge of Garveyism Studies," *Modern American History* 1, no. 3 (2018): 1–20.

6. Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (1963; repr., New York, 1978). Key works that followed Jacques Garvey during the first wave of Garveyism scholarship (1971–1988) include Theodore G. Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* (Berkeley, CA, 1971); John Henrik Clarke, ed., with the assistance of Amy Jacques Garvey, *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa* (New York, 1974); Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Dover, MA, 1976); Randall K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of a Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen, NJ, 1978); Emory J. Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles: Ideology and Community in the American Garvey Movement* (Los Angeles, 1980); Rupert Lewis, *Marcus Garvey: Anti-Colonial Champion* (Trenton, NJ, 1988).

7. For a useful survey of work in Black Power Studies, see Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 751–76. For two excellent recent works that join Keisha Blain's book in centering the experiences and contributions of black women to black nationalist politics, see Ula Y. Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017); and Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

8. Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago, 2001), 30. See also Akinyele Umoja, "Searching for Place: Nationalism, Separatism, and Pan-Africanism," in *A Companion to African American History*, ed. Alton Hornsby Jr. (Malden, MA, 2005), 530.

9. Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), 12.

10. See, for example, Ula Y. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920–1927* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007); Claudrena N. Harold, *The Rise and Fall of the Garvey Movement in the Urban South, 1918–1942* (New York, 2007); Robert Trent Vinson, *The Americans are Coming!: Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* (Athens, OH, 2012); Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); Ronald J. Stephens and Adam Ewing, eds., *Global Garveyism* (Gainesville, FL, forthcoming).

11. The twin concepts of "geographies of containment" and "rival geographies" are adopted by Stephanie M.H. Camp in *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004) and by Aisha K. Finch in *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841–1844* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015).

12. For Baker and the organizing tradition, see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA, 1995); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003). As Robin D.G. Kelley has shown, the Communist Party was also engaged in this sort of organizing in the Jim Crow South in the 1930s. See Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990).

13. The UNIA itself remained active during these decades (and is still active today).

14. Taylor, *Promise of Patriarchy*, and Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*. For other recent studies that center the work of black women activists, see Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York, 2009); Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC, 2011); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York, 2011); Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara Savage, *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014); Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015); Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham, NC, 2016).

Review of Keisha Blain's *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*

George White, Jr.

This year, thousands of children have been separated from their asylum-seeking parents and sequestered in internment camps throughout the country. The precise numbers are unclear, because this administration is still working on getting its lies straight, and, as Puerto Rico demonstrates, they only can count the dollars lining their pockets. The current crisis holds meaning for this review, given the call to arms against white nationalism in the book under consideration here.

I was going to begin my remarks here by talking about Solange Knowles's chart-topping 2016 album "A Seat at the Table." This black feminist recording, particularly the song "Cranes in the Sky," speaks to the nuanced, complex, and contradictory ways in which black women confront the white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy. Keisha Blain's *Set the World on Fire* does much the same, except with a focus on a discrete group of black women in the mid-twentieth century. This connection is real, as is the less obvious association between the sequestered children and white nationalism. Blain's monograph about black radical female activists from the 1930s and '40s fills a gap in the historical canon and serves as yet another serious meditation on why we, at present, find ourselves weeping in the playtime of others.

In part, *Set the World on Fire* attempts to extend the period some refer to as the "golden age of black nationalism." Blain argues quite persuasively that black nationalism did not die with the demise of Marcus Garvey. In fact, her well-researched book follows a number of female activists who not only sustained the momentum of black nationalism but expanded its reach through their own unique forms of organization and political collaboration. One of the great achievements of the text is that it takes seriously the lives and works of working-class and poor black women activists.

Set the World on Fire pursues the journeys of women like Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and Amy Jacques Garvey, as well as others much less famous, to write a group of black radicals back into the history of the human rights struggles of the early-to-mid-twentieth century. In addition to building on the extant scholarship on black nationalism, black internationalism, and black female activism, Blain knits together a story using materials from archives and sources as diverse as naturalization and census records, FBI files, international correspondence, and a collection of the writings of an avowed white supremacist. Without question, she achieves a fundamental goal of the book: understanding why these activists engaged in the radical politics and controversial tactics that put them at odds with the mainstream of African American organizing in the period.

The book opens with a survey of some of the female pioneers within Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association ("UNIA"), women like Eunice Lewis, Maymie De Mena, Laura Adorker Kofey, and the two Amy's—Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey, first and second wives, respectively, of the UNIA leader. Amy Ashwood helped Marcus build the UNIA in Jamaica and bring it to larger prominence in the wake of World War I. Their work came less than fifty years after the death of Reconstruction. African Americans had scarcely moved out of slavery—an institution that routinely separated parents from children—when white conservative political forces, armed with violent rhetoric and tactics, compelled them to squat in the shadow of democracy cast by "police powers" and "law & order." The law upon which Jeff

Sessions currently relies has its roots in this era, a period in which eugenicists and others declared that the federal government should halt the entry of "undesirable aliens" into the country. The appeal of the UNIA rose in the third decade of the twentieth century precisely because mob violence and racial fascism surged in 1919 and disappeared countless black people from their families via lynchings, riots, and other terrorist means.

While Garveyite women articulated similar views within this strain of black nationalism—racial pride, economic nationalism, self-help, racial separatism, an end to African colonization, and Black emigration to the continent—they often did so in varying roles. Some worked in the African Motor Corps or served as Black Cross nurses, while others wrote opinion pieces on the "Women's Page" of the *Negro World*. Those who attained leadership roles found their autonomy circumscribed by men in the group. Nevertheless, many exhibited what Blain characterizes as "proto-feminist" behavior, mentoring other women, for example, and calling for change in the old type of male leadership, even as they publicly touted a black masculinist approach as key to the liberation of all African-descended people. Marcus Garvey's eventual arrest and deportation from the United States served as a watershed moment for this community of female activists, and it is in the subsequent chapters that the book truly shines.

Chapters 2 and 3 not only demonstrate the critical importance of this cadre of activists to the survival of pan-Africanism in the twentieth century, they reveal the unique ways in which these leaders organized outside the presence of the charismatic Garvey. The male successors to Garvey struggled mightily, in part because they were not him and because his arrest and deportation cast serious doubts upon the validity of this strain of black nationalism. Blain eloquently asserts that a cadre of black women leaders kept alive the dream of black emigration, pan-Africanism, and solidarity with other people of color because they innovated and improvised. Since in large measure their institution-building relied less on spectacle than Garvey's did, they expanded the reach of the movement into the lives of the black poor and working-class outside Harlem and other metropolitan areas. Blain paints very detailed portraits of women like Alberta Spain and Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, who shifted out of the UNIA to create an allied group, the Peace Movement of Ethiopia ("PME"). In the author's deft hands, the birth and growth of the PME and like-minded groups demonstrate the centrality of female black nationalists.

Espousing and building community around black nationalist theory was never easy in the United States, but it was especially daunting in the American South. Employers large and small, abetted by elected officials and law enforcement, worked furiously to thwart the challenge to white supremacy known as the Great Migration. Any activist promoting race pride and black self-help had to be prepared for harassment, surveillance, and violence. Yet the leading promoter of the PME in the Jim Crow South was the diminutive Celia Jane Allen. Allen, and women like her, grew PME chapters in the Deep South not through a flair for the dramatic but through the quiet, patient, tactical building of relationships with local people, often starting with working-class preachers.

Blain's exhaustive archival work helps shine a light on this type of organizer and her tireless efforts. Because these women often left little record of themselves, it is not surprising that a large swath of what Blain can tell the readers about Allen comes from the author's analysis of FBI files maintained on her and other "race women." Blain's exhumation of Allen also is important because this radical history has been largely overshadowed by the work of competing activists in the Community Party USA or mainstream groups like the NAACP and the National

Urban League.

Chapters 4 and 5 maintain a focus on relationship-building, but this time within the context of the quest for black emigration to Liberia. These chapters contain well-referenced examinations of the relationships that Allen, Gordon and others built (or tried to build) with the leaders of Liberia, as well as with self-declared white supremacists like Earnest Sevier Cox and U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo. These political marriages of convenience served the interests of the black nationalists by extending their network to include influential white citizens who could help the dream of Liberia become a reality.

Bilbo was particularly helpful to the cause; he wrote and sponsored legislation to have the U.S. government financially support black emigration. His introduction of the Greater Liberia Bill was in itself a victory for the PME, but more interesting were the ways in which Allen and Gordon lobbied the senator by performing as submissive, unsophisticated constituents. Blain's analysis here is quite instructive, because it underscores the savvy nature of PME leaders while distinguishing them from their sisters like Amy Jacques Garvey, who supported Bilbo's legislation but took a much more assertive tone in her correspondence with the Mississippian. In addition to relationship-building, these chapters also highlight the tensions within the black nationalist movement and the criticisms that Gordon and her cohort faced from the leaders of integrationist organizations. As with other great scholarship in this area, Blain's work illuminates the gender and class fissures that dogged these female activists.

The final chapter of the book also is fascinating, but it is perhaps the least compelling. Blain does a masterful job of distinguishing the older generation of black nationalists from the younger generation of activists who emerged in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the lynching of Emmett Till. Where the former saw Liberia as the preferred destination to begin an African-based Renaissance, the latter grew to maturity watching the dismantling of formal colonialism in Asia and Africa. Consequently, they either imagined Ghana or Nigeria as a possible base for pan-Africanism or entertained the possibility of creating a black nation within the confines of the United States. Blain does well to highlight the differences and overlaps between the UNIA and similar groups, on the one hand, and the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, on the other. What is less convincing is the argument that the UNIA or PME deeply influenced the new generation of radicals. Still, this is a small quibble with this superb book.

Blain's expert depictions of this cadre of black female radicals avoids the trap of hagiography, a real accomplishment because there is so much to admire in these women. She eschews sentiment in favor of a clear-eyed analysis of their lives, works, and rivalries, thus rendering them as fully formed human beings. Throughout their odyssey, the women who leap from the pages of Blain's book often wrote less about gender than many of their contemporaries while actually doing more to become leaders and promote other women to leadership positions. At the same time, many of them supported Victorian notions of family life or openly promoted black male primacy.

Many of those who professed a deep, sincere affection for Africa also promoted civilizationist ideas that suggested the westernized children of Africa would save and uplift those on the continent. Even those women who wrote columns or editorials championing natural black beauty often did so in publications that contained advertisements for skin-bleaching creams or hair straighteners. Blain's eye for the contradictions in the work of these activists does not diminish them; indeed, it makes their commitment and achievements all the more impressive. The operational flexibility demonstrated by these historical actors also makes for gripping storytelling. It is no understatement to

say that Blain's work has earned a place next to some of the most thought-provoking scholarship of the last several years.

One measure of the scope of the work is how well it complements scholarship in many different areas. With its analysis of the varied ways in which black folk responded to white supremacy, Blain's book adds to Ibram Kendi's encyclopedic *Stamped from the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. *Set the World on Fire* also stands alongside recent scholarship on black internationalism, like Gerald Horne's *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America*; Judy Tzu-Chun Wu's *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era*; and Minkah Makalani's *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939*. In terms of black politics and unity-building, it complements Imani Perry's *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*. Its focus on black working-class organizing inflected by gender, migration, and identity fits neatly with Donna Murch's *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*, and Danielle McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. And for anyone familiar with the recent memoirs of Brittany Cooper and Patrisse Khan-Cullors, *Set the World on Fire* serves nicely as a prequel to Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* and Khan-Cullors's *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*.

Finally, it bears mentioning that Blain's monograph provides one possible antidote to the nation's current malaise. The mid-twentieth century educator/philosopher/mystic Dr. Howard Thurman poignantly scrutinized white nationalism in his 1965 book *The Luminous Darkness*. To his mind, a white supremacist society was more than signs and statu(t)es. Such a society would have to "array all of the forces of legislation and law enforcement . . . it must falsify the facts of history, tamper with the insights of religion and religious doctrine, editorialize and slant news and the printed word." Ultimately, Thurman mused that "the measure of a man's estimate of your strength is the kind of weapons he feels he must use in order to hold you fast in your prescribed place."¹ The modern-day machinery of oppression is vast and deadly. Accordingly, Blain's perceptive rendering of the heroines in *Set the World on Fire* compels us to do everything in our power to support truth-telling and promote fusion organizing against the dismal tide.

Note:

1. Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York, 1965), 71.

A Review of Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*

Hasan Kwame Jeffries

The "golden age of black nationalism" is a phrase wholly familiar to historians of the African American experience. It refers to the period from the middle of the nineteenth century through the first quarter of the twentieth century, when black nationalist thought flourished among African Americans. Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses popularized the phrase in the 1980s with his book of the same name.¹ In *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925*, as well as in his subsequent work, Moses established the chronological bookends of the age and set out the ideological boundaries of black nationalist

thought, framing it as reflective of a separatist impulse that found primary expression in the emigrationist arguments of ministers and educators like Henry Highland Garnet and Alexander Crummell and culminating in the Back-to-Africa organizing of race-first advocate Marcus Garvey.

Moses's work made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of black nationalist thought as an authentic and logical response to white supremacy, but it deemphasized black nationalist ideologies that fell outside the spectrum of separatist ideas, left little room for black nationalist organizing after Garvey's most active years, and minimized the black nationalist articulations and activism of black women.

John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, writing almost a decade before Moses, and Ula Y. Taylor and Rhonda Y. Williams, writing several decades after him, laid the groundwork not only for broadening the range of black nationalist ideologies and pushing the "Golden Age" chronology forward in time, but also for retrieving black nationalist women from the margins of history.² Keisha N. Blain builds on this foundation, greatly expanding our understanding of black nationalism and black nationalists during the highpoint of the "Golden Age" through the Second World War.

Blain sees black nationalism as "the political view that black people of African descent constitute a separate group or nationality on the basis of their distinct culture, shared history, and experiences" (3). Hers is an expansive definition, one that could be so encompassing that it loses its nuance. But Blain applies it judiciously, allowing for the inclusion of new black nationalist voices and ideas, specifically those of African American working-class women, without including every voice and idea emanating from race-conscious black thinkers and activists. This selectivity enables her to place black nationalism on a continuum of black political thought.

Blain's framing of black nationalism allows for the ideology to co-exist alongside other political constructs, especially integration, which for most people is what comes immediately to mind when they think about black approaches to change. Its coexistence with other constructs is not limited to the "Golden Age," either; it is both timeless and ever present, although it ebbs and flows in popularity. Imagined this way, the pertinent question is not whether people subscribed to black nationalism outside of the "Golden Age," but rather how widely and deeply did they embrace it before, during, and after this period?

For Blain, then, black nationalist thought is the entry point for excavating the ideas and actions of untold numbers of African American working-class women when black nationalism flourished. And since black nationalism thrived beyond the high point of the "Golden Age," Blaine introduces us to a bevy of unfamiliar black nationalist women thinkers and organizations and reintroduces us to a handful of familiar ones known mainly to us because of their visibility during the "Golden Age."

Not surprisingly, Blain chooses the Garvey movement as her starting point. It is a logical choice, given its size during the early twentieth century and its influence long after. She explains that untold numbers of black nationalist women began their political activism in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and gained a sense of empowerment as members of the organization. But she pushes hard against a Garvey-centric understanding of black nationalism that positions Garveyism "as the sole or even primary prism through

which women leaders crafted political responses to global white supremacy" (6). The UNIA, she writes, "functioned as a political incubator," politicizing and training black women for "future leadership" (26). It is where many black women launched their activist careers, but it is not where those careers ended.

Blain sees the life of Amy Ashwood, Garvey's first wife and a champion of Garveyism, as particularly instructive. Activists like Ashwood carved out a space for themselves in the UNIA that enabled them to exercise authority beyond the narrow confines of what men within the organization thought women's roles should be. More than that, argues Blain, these women created opportunities for other black women. "During its formative years," she writes, "Ashwood maintained a vocal presence in the UNIA, encouraging the integration of women into the organization's leadership structure" (18). At the same time, Blain makes it clear that Amy Ashwood's black nationalist ideas were very much her own, and her activism stretched far beyond simply trying to spread Garveyism. In fact, Blain shows that it often departed from Garveyism entirely, resulting in expressions of black nationalism that Garvey himself had never imagined.

Blain follows Amy Ashwood into the "post-Garvey moment," the two decades or so after his imprisonment in 1923. Tracking her into this period reveals that the void created by Garvey's decline did not remain unfilled. A cadre of women organizers stepped into that space because they had been deep political thinkers and activists for years. "A vanguard of nationalist women leaders emerged on the local, national, and international scenes," writes Blain, "practicing a pragmatic form of nationalist politics that allowed for greater flexibility, adaptability, and experimentation" (3).

Retracing Amy Ashwood's activist steps not only highlights the work of black nationalist women, but it also makes it demonstrably clear that black nationalism did not die on the vine of Garveyism when the patriarch of the movement was no longer able to nourish it. The very existence of the "cadre of effective women organizers and leaders" to which Amy Ashwood belonged belies the popular declension narrative of black nationalism, which posits that black nationalist thought and activism went into a steep decline during the Depression and World War II eras.

Blain deploys the biographical approach that she uses to tell the story of black nationalist women associated with the Garvey movement to great effect throughout the book. It is an approach that shows the evolution of these women as independent thinkers and activists, which is essential to understanding them on their own terms rather than as ancillary characters in stories about black nationalist men. To be sure, black nationalist men, most prominently Garvey, played significant roles in the political lives of black nationalist women. But they were conduits for women's black nationalist expressions, not messiahs to whom the women pledged blind fealty. Although black nationalist women shared the men's vision and views, they developed thoughts and ideas of their own. Their independent perspectives enabled them to take leadership positions within organizations like the UNIA and to form their own black nationalist groups after the UNIA declined.

Finding these women was no easy task. They operated outside of mainstream civil rights organizations and radical left circles because they rejected the integrationist appeals of organizations like the NAACP and dismissed the Marxist philosophy of groups like the Communist Party. In

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addition, as working-class women, they were not part of the black middle-class women's club movement. This doesn't mean that they were marginal actors in the black freedom struggle; it only means that they were marginalized by scholars who showed greater interest in organizations and groups that were not these women's primary vehicles for political expression.

Blain searches for these women in places others ignore. She combs through the records of post-UNIA black nationalist organizations like the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME), which provided working-poor black women with a "crucial space" for engaging in black nationalist and internationalist politics during the 1930s (61). While far less recognizable than the NAACP and other mainstream civil rights organizations, these groups existed alongside them and maintained steady if not always thriving memberships.

The author also mines a wide range of sources to unearth evidence of these women's activism and political thinking. She examines what they wrote in private correspondence and what they published in newsletters and newspapers. She tracks their travel overseas as they lived out their global vision for black freedom. And she carefully sifts through government surveillance records, filtering out the racist paranoia of federal agents and interpreting black dissembling to reveal rare glimpses of black nationalist women's grassroots organizing work.

Blain evaluates these women's activism by "examining the principles and philosophies that undergirded (their) actions" rather than by strictly assessing the "tangible outcomes of their political struggles" (5). This is no small thing. There is tremendous value in measuring the effectiveness of an activist's work by assessing the extent to which they realized their goals. But far too often, when an activist's work is less than totally effective, that person is overlooked, especially if that person is a black nationalist, and particularly if that person is a black nationalist woman. Considering black nationalist women's work from start to finish makes what they did the focus of analysis instead of how others responded to what they did. Blain's approach centers black nationalist women; the latter decenters them.

Taking black nationalist women seriously as political thinkers enriches Blain's analysis of their preferred pathways to black empowerment. Her explication of their embrace of emigration is a prime example. She begins by establishing that going back to Africa, and to Liberia in particular, was "a logical response to the racial hatred that permeated much of the nation" (81). She also makes it clear that the appeal of returning to Africa increased during the harsh economic times of the Great Depression—an important point, since scholars tend to confine their analyses of twentieth-century emigration sentiment to the high point of Garveyism. And she completes her astute engagement of black nationalist women's emigration efforts by acknowledging that the Liberia that existed in their imagination—a nation with more than enough resources to rescue African Americans from a white supremacist world—was a fiction. Liberia was no Wakanda. This did not mean, though, that emigration was a flight of fancy. Blain reminds us that the Afro-futurism that black nationalist women engaged in was grounded in a close reading of black prospects in America, and a thoughtful, albeit overly wishful, assessment of black possibilities in Africa.

Emigration, of course, was just one of several pathways to empowerment that black nationalist women advocated.

Blain introduces us to activists who promoted everything from black capitalism to Pan-Africanism. And she also points out the numerous strategies they used to advance their various viewpoints—tactical approaches to change that included letter writing campaigns, petition drives, and political lobbying. Here she includes a noteworthy discussion of black nationalist women's ideological inconsistencies, such as the willingness of some to collaborate with avowed white supremacists like Senator Theodore Bilbo in an effort to win federal support for emigration. She explores these problematic partnerships and concludes that they were born of political pragmatism, a characteristic of black nationalist women, but one that in this particular instance served to undermine their credibility.

Blain also explains that this political pragmatism extended to the ways in which these women operated in highly gendered black nationalist spaces. By examining their words and actions, she shows that they challenged the "prevailing ethos of black patriarchy" (12). Still, they "wavered between feminist and nationalist ideals, articulating a critique of black patriarchy while endorsing traditionally conservative views on gender and sexuality" (36). It is clear that black nationalist women were of their time, and to expect them to be otherwise would be to hold them to an unfair standard. At the same time, Blain makes a compelling argument that they exhibited a kind of "proto-feminism" through their advocacy of gender equality inside and outside of black nationalist organizations, anticipating struggles

for women's liberation that materialized in the 1960s and 1970s.

Blain is actually quite deft at pointing out precursors. She does so again in her chapter on the work black nationalist women performed in the Jim Crow South. Focusing specifically on Mississippi, she highlights their grassroots organizing activities, which in many ways foreshadowed the work of organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) a couple of decades later. Civil rights scholars write about the ways grassroots activists in the 1960s tapped into a black organizing tradition, especially in the rural South, but they typically just allude to what came earlier rather than provide a focused analysis of historical examples. Blain makes the black organizing tradition visible by following black nationalist women organizers into the homes of rural black Mississippians as they tapped into preexisting social networks, especially those rooted in the black church, to win converts to their cause.

By excavating the activities of black women organizers, Blain also enhances our understanding of black working-class political thought. She takes us inside the weekly meetings of black nationalist organizations like the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, led by Maude Lena Gordon and Celia Jane Allen and thereby shows us the willingness of African Americans in the rural South and the urban Midwest, places usually overlooked when considering black political thought during this time, to engage in black internationalist discourse. Clearly Amy Ashwood was a global thinker, but so too were the many nameless and faceless black tenant farmers and factory workers who shared her understanding of a transnational color line.

Blain's work builds toward the important conclusion that the political ideas that informed the activism of black nationalist women during the first quarter of the twentieth century continued to percolate years later and still found a

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receptive audience among the black working class during the most dynamic years of the civil rights era. "Black nationalism not only survived but also thrived during the postwar era," writes Blain, "taking on new shapes and expressions in a range of black political organizations in the United States and across the globe" (168).

This persistence did not mean that there were not significant points of divergence between old guard black nationalist women and younger civil rights and Black Power advocates. Blain points out, for instance, that Liberia had lost much of its appeal by the 1960s. Significantly, though, Africa had not. Beginning with Ghana, newly independent African nations sparked new interest in the continent.

Blain sets out to "uncover the previously hidden voices of black nationalist women activists and intellectuals." Through outstanding research, she achieves her primary goal. But in doing so, she reveals something more. She shows that the voices of black nationalist women were hidden in plain sight. As activists and intellectuals, black nationalist women played major roles in black nationalist organizations, several of which they founded, and through these groups, they shaped the contours of black nationalist politics and practice. Blain teaches us that black nationalist women were never silent. Amplifying their voices, therefore, is absolutely necessary for understanding their contributions to black nationalist movements, and for making sense of the trajectory of black political thought and working-class activism.

In any event, the privileged denizens of what Martin Weil referred to as "a pretty good club" might have seen their doors pushed open just a crack, but most of the subjects of the study of the American people and their nation's foreign policy were still on the outside looking in. Keisha N. Blain's new book puts a powerful shoulder to those doors and in so doing makes a number of significant contributions to our understanding of the deeper meaning of "American foreign policy."

supposed to make the Foreign Service more "democratic," failed to make much of a dent in what African American newspapers and magazines routinely referred to as the "lily-white club."¹

Then things changed, both in the scholarship and to a lesser extent in the Department of State and Foreign Service.

A steady stream of books and articles appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s that focused on the African American interest in and impact on U.S. foreign relations. These studies differed from earlier attempts to analyze the impact of racism on American diplomacy—which, after all, traditionally focused on the racism exhibited by the elites in the Department of State and White House. Instead, this new body of work sought to understand the African American viewpoint on the nation's international affairs: their priorities; the main ways in which they communicated their interests; their critiques and recommendations;

the interconnections between the Civil Rights Movement and Cold War diplomacy; and even their (very limited) direct participation as U.S. representatives and diplomats. Research appeared from Gerald Horne, Mary L. Dudziak, Thomas Borstelmann, Brenda Gayle Plummer, Carol Anderson, Penny Von Eschen, and so many others, on the NAACP, the Council for African Affairs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Bunche, Paul Robeson, African American artists and intellectuals who served as unofficial cultural ambassadors, and the handful of black diplomats who managed to forge careers in State, the Foreign Service, and the United States Information Agency.

New research, yes, but was the focus truly different? We still zeroed in on leaders, notables, outstanding individuals and groups, people whom Carol Anderson referred to as the "bourgeois radicals" of the NAACP, and, to a large extent, African American men. Perhaps it was the fact that records for these individuals and groups were more readily available; or perhaps it was merely the old style of focusing on elites, white or black. In any event, the privileged denizens of what Martin Weil referred to as "a pretty good club" might have seen their doors pushed open just a crack, but most of the subjects of the study of the American people and their nation's foreign policy were still on the outside looking in. Keisha N. Blain's new book puts a powerful shoulder to those doors and in so doing makes a number of significant contributions to our understanding of the deeper meaning of "American foreign policy."

Blain focuses on a "cadre of black nationalist women" who sought to "challenge global white supremacy during the twentieth century" by "seeking to advance black nationalist and internationalist politics" (1). Some of these women, such as Amy Jacques Garvey, might be familiar to historians. Many of the others emerge from the shadows. "Feeling alienated from many of the ideas and political approaches of activists in mainstream civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the NUL [National Urban League] and rejecting the Marxist platform of leftist organizations like the Communist Party, the black nationalist women...created spaces of their own in which to experiment with various strategies and ideologies" (2).

From the outset, then, Blain is clearly talking about a group of African Americans who are "different" from the people who have populated most of the previous studies of black Americans and U.S. diplomacy. They are, first and foremost, women. These black nationalists might have started their careers in activism supporting better known men, such as Marcus Garvey, but in the 1930s and 1940s they "became central leaders in various black

Notes:

1. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (1978, repr., Oxford, UK, 1988).
2. John H. Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis, IN, 1970); Ula Y. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life & Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill, 2002); and Rhonda Y. Williams, *Concrete Demands: The Search for Black Power in the 20th Century* (New York, 2015).

Review of Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*

Michael L. Krenn

Decades ago, those of us who toiled in the field of U.S. diplomatic history spent most of our research time locked in the musty confines of the National Archives in downtown Washington DC, patiently (or not) waiting for the staff to bring us boxes of documents from Record Group 59. On occasion, we also traveled to the various presidential libraries, scouring the files for anything related to foreign relations. Wherever we ended up, however, the focus was almost inevitably the same. The Department of State was where the action was.

The actors themselves—officials at State and the diplomats sent abroad; foreign policy experts in the White House—were a pretty homogenous group, so much so that the old joke about the typical denizen of the foreign policy making bureaucracy being "pale, male, from Yale" seemed to be too accurate to dismiss as a mere stereotype. In fact, it became a topic for scholars, as Martin Weil, Robert D. Schulzinger, Andrew L. Steigman, Homer L. Calkin, and others turned their attention to the elitism and exclusionary practices that kept State a bastion of white male privilege. Even the passage of the Rogers Act in 1924, which was

nationalist movements in the United States and other parts of the globe, agitating for racial unity, black political self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency" (3).

These women are not easily pigeonholed. They had clearly turned their backs on what they perceived to be the sham of "American democracy," but they also seemed to have little interest in the political machinations of the communists. Their ideology was most definitely a racial ideology. They sought neither equal rights nor assimilation, but instead looked to escape—going "back to Africa"—as the only solution for the crushing racism they experienced in the United States. Finally, these women were outsiders in almost every sense of the word. Most significantly, they were not "elites": they, and many of their followers, were the poor, the dispossessed, the working class.

In studying these women, Blain moves away from the traditional forms of scholarship that have attempted to place African American activists somewhere along the accepted political spectrum—radicals, communists, conservatives, liberals—and then insert them into the international issues of the day: late nineteenth-century imperialism; World War I; World War II; and, most particularly, the Cold War. They might be critics; they might be supporters; they might even be active participants, but in one way or another they were actors in fairly familiar settings.

Blain takes us to another world that is populated by little-known individuals such as Celia Jane Allen, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, and Ethel Waddell, and the organizations they led, such as the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME). Organizing mostly within the United States and Jamaica, these women also reached out to potential allies in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere to support their black nationalist agenda. They had no desire to work with the U.S. government to achieve "common goals" in the international arena because their goals were completely different from the government's. They wanted "racial unity, black political self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency" (3).

The ultimate goal for many of these women was to convince U.S. officials to assist them in returning to Africa. Not only did this goal make them anathema to most of those officials, the mainstream media, and even a large number of African American civil rights activists, but—and this is one of the most interesting findings in Blain's study, it pushed them toward alliances with a bizarre cast of characters. Receiving no responses to their requests from the Department of State, the White House, and most congressmen, they turned to the only people who seemed to share their desire to have African Americans return to Africa: white supremacists.

It is jarring to read about African Americans writing to such despicable characters as the racist firebrand from Mississippi, Senator Theodore Bilbo, and Earnest Sevier Cox, who portrayed himself as a philosopher for the white supremacists of America, and accentuating their common goal of removing African Americans from the United States. But these women believed that desperate times called for desperate measures. As Gordon explained in the 1950s, "The condition of the world is so dark for black people, it is hard to believe that our government will do anything for us. They seem to have forgotten all about the suffering slaves in America" (182). She and the other black nationalist women had no illusions that the support of reprehensible characters such as Bilbo and Cox flowed from an altruistic attitude toward African Americans. Nevertheless, they believed that such alliances with the devil were the only

alternatives open to them in their search for support for their back-to-Africa plans.

Blain also highlights the more routine approaches these women took to achieve their black nationalist goals. Since they did not operate within large bureaucratic agencies or organizations, their funding was meager, to say the least. When we read of Celia Jane Allen tramping on foot through the heart of the Jim Crow South in the 1930s, relying on the kindness of strangers for housing, food, and donations, we begin to understand that this is a very different stage of the "global struggle for freedom." Ignored by most of the press (even the African American newspapers and magazines), they engaged in grassroots organizing and fund-raising. In many ways, however, this was by choice. They knew that their message did not resonate with most African American elites, and so they reached out to the masses of poor and working-class blacks, handing out literature, giving countless speeches, enrolling them in their organizations, collecting pennies, nickels, and dimes in donations and signatures on petitions. The contrast between them and Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, who wrote directly to the White House about his concerns, or Du Bois, who attended the meetings in San Francisco that led to the establishment of the United Nations, could not have been starker or more meaningful.

The book is not without its problems. I noted one minor error. Charles Mitchell is referred to as the "U.S.

More problematic is the fact that the "internationalism" of the women discussed in the study is sometimes difficult to discern. To a large degree, their focus tended to be on local and national issues. Even the interest in Liberia was not always evidence of seeing the race issue on a global level. As Blain makes clear, many African Americans saw emigration as a way to "solve our problem" in the United States.

ambassador to Liberia" (108) in the 1930s; Edward R. Dudley became the first ambassador in 1949. And although Blain praises the organizational abilities of the black nationalist women and the appeal of their messages, there is little evidence—aside from the oft-mentioned PME petition of 1933 asking for U.S. government assistance in helping African Americans emigrate to West Africa signed by an "estimated 400,000" people—that the largest groups they headed ever numbered more than a few thousand full-time members.

More problematic is the fact that the "internationalism" of the women discussed in the study is sometimes difficult to discern. To a large degree, their focus tended to be on local and national issues. Even the interest in Liberia was not always evidence of seeing the race issue on a global level. As Blain makes clear, many African Americans saw emigration as a way to "solve our problem" in the United States (109). Her conclusion that "a vanguard of black nationalist women fought to eradicate the global color line," contrasts with their continuing emphasis on escaping racism in America by returning to Africa to build their own societies and suggests that instead of trying to erase the color line, they sought to cement it in place (198).

Such concerns should not diminish the importance of Blain's work. As she herself recognizes, she is attempting to unravel a complex, confusing, and sometimes contradictory history. That she manages to tease out so many important threads in her slim volume speaks to the depth of her research, the originality of her theorizing, and the vitality of her writing.

When all is said and done, does this study tell us very much about "U.S. foreign policy"? The short answer would be "No." After all, there are no treaties or diplomatic notes that resulted from the work of the black nationalist women. The Department of State is barely mentioned; presidents and secretaries of state, if present at all, are very much in the background. The mainstream press was largely dismissive when it wasn't ignoring these women and their organizations altogether. Even the African American press seemed to take little notice.

Yet, by focusing on this little-known group of activists, Blain is clearly asking us to expand our field of vision when we consider what makes up our nation's foreign policy, and who makes it. Simply because these women faced such immense struggles to have their voices heard does not mean that those voices were not important. The very fact that they faced so much opposition and that the FBI expended so many resources in harassing them suggests two important conclusions. First, that those in power draw very definite boundaries for what is and what is not allowed to be part of the discussion regarding international relations. Second, the fact that these are usually lower/working class women of color clearly indicates that there are also very sharp lines of demarcation for who is allowed to participate. The women in Blain's book did not succeed in setting the world on fire, but it seems clear that this study will help to set some new fires burning in the fields of U.S. diplomatic history and international relations.

Note:

1. Martin Weil, *A Pretty Good Club: The Founding Fathers of the U.S. Foreign Service* (New York, 1978); Robert D. Schulzinger, *The Making of the Diplomatic Mind: The Training, Outlook, and Style of United States Foreign Service Officers, 1908-1931* (Middletown, CT, 1975); Andrew L. Steigman, *The Foreign Service of the United States: First Line of Defense* (Boulder, CO, 1985); Homer L. Calkin, *Women in the Department of State: Their Role in American Foreign Affairs* (Washington, D.C., 1978).

Response to Roundtable on *Set the World on Fire*

Keisha N. Blain

Set the World on Fire was a very challenging book to write. First, I set out to tell a story about a group of women whom many scholars had previously overlooked. These women were "on the margins"; they struggled to find a place in their own communities—let alone in mainstream U.S. and global politics.¹ Second, I set out to tell a story about a group of women who maintained many controversial and unconventional views. While the women in this study shared a common thread of black nationalism, their political ideas and practices were far more fluid, complex, and complicated than this one term suggests. Third, I set out to write a social and intellectual history of mostly black, working-poor activist-intellectuals—a group of individuals who for the most part did not write books or articles. The absence of such documents posed a particular challenge for me as a writer determined to capture these women's voices.

In the end, I was able to piece together these women's lives and ideas by drawing on a range of sources, including archival material, newspaper articles, oral histories and FBI files. *Set the World on Fire* is the result of my effort not only to expand our understanding of black women's politics in the twentieth century, but also to build an archive, which is an extensive, time-consuming process. What I wanted more than anything else was for readers to develop an in-depth understanding of these women's ideas and politics. I also wanted readers to engage these women in a way that takes their contributions to national and global politics seriously. The thoughtful and generous reviews included in this roundtable confirm that I accomplished these goals. I appreciate the scholars who carefully read the book and took the time to grapple with the many themes I explore.

As Adam Ewing acknowledges, black nationalism remains an underrepresented topic in studies on the black freedom struggle. Scholars still have a hard time understanding the significance of black nationalist thought in general, and they certainly struggle to see the

significance of the women who were so instrumental to its growth and dissemination. It is difficult to dismantle ideas that have been fixed in U.S. thought and culture for decades. And as I wrote the book and worked with FBI records, I was constantly reminded of the extreme lengths to which federal officials went to silence the voices of the historical actors who take center stage in my book.

In many ways, the academy has replicated this act of censorship by continuing to marginalize black nationalist thought and praxis. Each year, scholars produce books, dissertations, and articles on the black freedom struggle that fail to take seriously the historical significance of contributions of black nationalist activists, especially those who preceded Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. As Ewing rightfully points out, "black nationalism continues to be approached from the perspective of its assumed impossibility." I would add too that black nationalism in the academy (and beyond) continues to be approached from a male-dominated and masculinist perspective, one that marginalizes—and sometimes ignores—the crucial role of women.

In writing *Set the World on Fire*, then, I hoped to encourage historians to dismantle many of the ideas that have been cemented into the field of history. There is perhaps no greater feeling of accomplishment than knowing that the book has helped to broaden the scholarly discourse on global black politics while also helping to push historians to think outside of the box when it comes to the matter of sources, methodology, and approaches.

As Michael L. Krenn emphasizes in his review, *Set the World on Fire* "makes a number of significant contributions to our understanding of the deeper meaning of 'American foreign policy.'" One of the crucial aspects of the book is that it shows how the idea of black internationalism was fundamental to these women's political visions. The key figures in the book, including Amy Ashwood Garvey, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Celia Jane Allen, Maymie De Mena and Amy Jacques Garvey, maintained a global racial consciousness and were committed to ending racism and discrimination not only where they lived, but also in every part of the globe. Through a myriad of mediums, these women built transnational networks with a diverse group of activists in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Whereas scholars often view black internationalism through the prisms of international travel or foreign policy, I focus on the varied ways in which black activists and intellectuals engaged in internationalist politics from the margins (often through the lens of grassroots internationalism). Africa—both real and imagined—figured prominently in the minds of black nationalist women in the twentieth century.

These women envisioned Africa—and they were often thinking specifically of Liberia—as a haven for people of African descent. Many desired to relocate to Liberia as a means of escaping racism in the United States and improving their socioeconomic conditions. They supported emigration as a practical solution to many of the challenges they were facing in this period. Their strong affinity for Africa motivated their decision to lead a vibrant emigrationist movement in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. But their interest in leaving the United States should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in dismantling the global color line. As I detail in the book, these women resisted global white supremacy and believed that improving the economic and political standing of Liberia—as well as Africa in general—was one step toward liberation.

Their efforts had a significant global impact. Many of the women were able to mobilize activists around the world. Those who had the means to travel overseas collaborated with a diverse group of activists and politicians in various locales. Amy Ashwood Garvey, for example, relocated to

Liberia in the 1940s and worked closely with the Liberian president, William V.S. Tubman. Other women activists who could not travel abroad utilized a variety of means to build a transnational network of activists who were committed to the cause of black liberation. During the 1940s, for example, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon organized a ten-day visit for Akweke Abyssinia Nwafor Orizu, a nationalist from Eastern Nigeria who became acting president of Nigeria in 1966.

These are only a few examples to underscore the diverse and creative means by which these women engaged internationalism in the twentieth century. Their ideas and activities look a lot different from those of the historical figures who usually occupy countless books and articles. However, they are no less significant to the historical narratives on twentieth century black internationalism.

To be sure, some of the groups I discuss in the book were small. I estimate they had a few hundred or thousand members. But it is important to remember that these groups were able to amass large followings, and their activities had significant impacts that went far beyond the number of people who formally joined. I think it is also important to remember that their influence and reach extended far beyond membership figures. As George White Jr. astutely points out in his review, black nationalist women “not only sustained the momentum of black nationalism but expanded its reach through their own unique forms of organization and political collaboration.”

Another of the fundamental goals of my book is to move beyond organizations and even individuals in order to underscore *the power of ideas*. As I try to demonstrate in the book, ideas cannot be contained by one individual, organization, or movement, and they are often sustained in black communities for centuries, moving across time and space. The narrative arch of the book helps to convey this point. I intentionally open the first chapter with the formation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1914. What began as an idea and a rather small gathering led by Marcus Garvey and Amy Ashwood emerged into one of the most influential black organizations in the globe.

It was this organization—and more specifically, the ideas that flourished in this critical space—that captured the imagination of someone like Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, who in turn established the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) in Chicago in 1932. And it was through Gordon’s PME that someone like Celia Jane Allen came to embrace black nationalism, which motivated her to organize black sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South in the late 1930s. And it was through Allen’s actions that someone like Thomas Bernard came to view black nationalism as a logical response to global white supremacy during the 1940s. And so on.

These brief stories, which I elaborate in more detail in the book, offer a glimpse into how black women were also instrumental to the spread and articulation of black nationalism in the decades following Marcus Garvey’s 1927 deportation to Jamaica and following the subsequent decline in the UNIA’s membership. They serve as a reminder that membership numbers alone do not suffice to capture influence and effectiveness.

This point is further emphasized by taking note of the rise of black nationalist politics, under the banner of Black Power, in the 1960s and 1970s. I am certainly not suggesting that the expressions of black nationalism in this period are the same as the ones I detail in the book, but I think it is

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important not to overlook the ideological threads and connections between organizations like the UNIA and PME and later ones like the Black Panther Party and the Republic of New Afrika. Ultimately, what I hope readers will grasp is that black nationalist movements would have all but disappeared were it not for the women who take center stage in *Set the World on Fire*. What is more, these women laid the groundwork for the generation of black activists who came of age during the civil rights-black power era. In the 1960s, many black activists—

including Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael—drew on these women’s ideas and political strategies. Historians have largely overlooked this point, and I try to make those ideological connections clear amidst a very complex and complicated story.

Finally, I reject the notion that these women did not “set the world on fire” simply because they failed to achieve many of their tangible goals within their lifetimes. As Hasan Jeffries explains, “Considering black nationalist women’s work from start to finish makes what they did the focus of analysis, instead of how others responded to what they did.” This was certainly what I set out to accomplish—to center black nationalist women’s politics and highlight the significance of their perspectives and approaches without assessing them based on whether or not they were “successful” in the eyes of others. As I chart in the book, black nationalist women leaders led and participated in a series of political and social movements that significantly transformed the lives of countless black men and women. These activists dared to dream of a better future and sought to (re)awaken the political consciousness of black men and women in the United States and across the African diaspora. The “freedom dreams” they envisioned propelled them to create new spaces and opportunities for people of color to openly confront racial and sexual discrimination and assert their political agency.² In so doing, they left an indelible mark on the lives of many black men and women in the decades to follow.

Notes:

1. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From the Margin to the Center* (Cambridge, MA, 2000).

2. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002), ix.